

# CONTEMPLATIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY: A PATH OF UNCOVERING BRILLIANT SANITY

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## INTRODUCTION

“Contemplative Psychotherapy” is the joining of individual and interpersonal disciplines: bringing personal contemplative practice to the clinical practice of psychotherapy. In this way, the practice of psychotherapy itself can become a contemplative practice. At The Naropa Institute, we have been training Contemplative Psychotherapists since 1976. While there are psychotherapies based on other contemplative traditions, our foundation is the Buddhist and Shambhala traditions.<sup>1</sup> Buddhism is a 2,500-year-old wisdom tradition based on meditation, as is the Shambhala tradition, which predates Buddhism.

Our Buddhist roots—specifically the Vajrayana tradition of the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages—teach the means to fully awaken our enlightened potential through meditation practice and to recognize the wisdom within even the most confused states of mind.

The Shambhala tradition, a secular approach with its origins also in Tibet, was introduced in North America by Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. It emphasizes the creation of “enlightened society” based on bravery and gentleness in which each person’s inherent wakefulness can be acknowledged and nurtured.<sup>2</sup>

Our path of Contemplative Psychotherapy may be said to have two parents: the wisdom traditions of Buddhism and Shambhala and the clinical traditions of Western psychology, especially the humanistic school. Like all offspring, it has much in common with both parents and yet is uniquely itself. From contemplative tradition comes the sitting practice of mindfulness/awareness meditation, together with a highly sophisticated understanding of the functioning

of the mind in sanity and in confusion. From Western psychology come the investigation of the stages of human development, a precise language for discussing mental disturbance, and the intimate method of working with others known as “psychotherapy.”

This path has the potential to uncover “brilliant sanity.” Brilliant sanity, the root teaching of Contemplative Psychotherapy and the emblem of this journal, refers to the unconditional sanity or basic healthiness inherent in everyone. In the Buddhist tradition this is known as “Buddha-nature,” our basic enlightened or awakened—hence brilliant—nature. In the Shambhala teachings it is known as “basic goodness.” What does this mean? It means that no matter what physical or mental state of being we are in, depressed, confused, clear, angry, stupid, wise, frightened, psychotic, nonetheless, we are by nature fundamentally sane. Whether we are sick or well in the conventional sense is inseparable from this fundamental nature and is, therefore, workable just as it is. This is our path.

My intention here is to highlight the essential features of the path of Contemplative Psychotherapy: (1) Discovering Space, (2) Clarifying View and Intention, (3) Providing Hospitality, (4) Opening to Exchange, and (5) Compassionate Action. These five topics reflect the five “Buddha families,” which we explore through the “Maitri Space Awareness practice” and which are described below.

## THE DISCOVERY OF SPACE: THE “BUDDHA” FAMILY

The first family, the “Buddha” Buddha-family, is related to the element of space and to the recognition of brilliant sanity. We can understand brilliant sanity better by looking at its three main qualities.

### *Three Qualities of Brilliant Sanity*

The first quality is spaciousness. Our experience has within it a quality of space, or emptiness, that can accommodate any state of mind whatsoever. Our mind is like the sky, and all of the things that

occur within it are like the weather. Just as the sky is not disturbed by the weather, our mind is not affected by the clouds, hail storms, pleasant and unpleasant emotions that come and go. The mind itself is spacious, empty. This quality is not graspable; we cannot hang on to it or even touch it. Yet, we can recognize it in our experience.

The second quality of brilliant sanity is “clarity.” From the Buddhist point of view, an understanding of emptiness as space with nothing in it is incomplete. Emptiness is more than just a vacuum, more than the absence of experience. It is also a quality of awareness or wakefulness. This is sometimes called “clarity.” Awareness is always available to us. We can join any experience with awareness, which is clarity, the direct perception of things as they are without distorting that perception in any way. It sounds very simple, but it is actually quite difficult. Cognitive psychology has done a fine job of demonstrating how we generally filter our experience through our expectations, thoughts, preconceptions, and so on.

So, emptiness and clarity are inseparable, and brilliant sanity refers to the fact that inseparable emptiness/clarity is the very nature of who we are.

The third quality of brilliant sanity is compassion. When the obstacles to spaciousness and clarity dissolve, the impulse toward compassionate action arises naturally. When we hear the squeal of brakes outside the window and hear the yelping of a dog, our first impulse—before thought—is to go see what happened. When we hear the cry of a child, our first instinct is to help. It is only in the flicker of the next moment that we can very quickly come up with reasons why we should not interfere, why we should hold back. If we look closely at our experience, that first reaction is a compassionate impulse, before confusion arises, an inherent warmth and tender-heartedness. In the Shambhala teachings this is called the “genuine heart of sadness.” Most psychotherapists are well aware of this soft-hearted nature, but perhaps we do not talk about it enough.

These three qualities of brilliant sanity—spaciousness, clarity

and compassion—are inherent in the client, in the therapist, in everyone.

### *The Tool for Discovering Space: Meditation Practice*

In contemplative traditions we place great emphasis upon personal experience. Before we can have any conviction in brilliant sanity as our fundamental nature, we need to look closely at our own mind and experience. The basic method for examining our experience is the sitting practice of mindfulness/awareness meditation. In addition to this, we work with the Maitri Space Awareness practice. First, let us look at sitting practice.

The sitting meditation practice is drawn from both the Buddhist and Shambhala teachings. As meditation instruction is usually done in person, what I will write here conveys only the spirit of the practice, which works with one's posture, attention to the out-breath, and awareness of the thoughts that arise.<sup>3</sup>

Sitting cross-legged on a cushion on the floor, one soon discovers that one's attention wanders from the simplicity of the out-breath and one gets lost in thoughts, caught up in emotions, or fixated on particular sense perceptions. In the context of this practice, these experiences are regarded as mental activity and are mentally labelled as "thinking." Then, gently, one returns one's attention to the breath.

Practicing in this way provides a gentle yet precise method for simply being with ourselves and our experience. In mindfulness/awareness meditation, mindfulness refers to precise attentiveness to the moment-to-moment arising and dissolving of mental and physical phenomena. This extends naturally into awareness, a more panoramic apprehension of both phenomena and the context, or space, within which they occur. These two give birth to *maitri*.

The willingness to experience whatever arises in our body and mind, *maitri* is a key notion in Contemplative Psychotherapy. *Maitri* is a quality of warmth and friendliness to ourselves, which enables us to open to our experience fully, see it without distortion, and

let it be what it is without manipulation. By cultivating maitri, the ability to “be with” ourselves in this way, we train to “be with” others as well.

In 1985, I attended “The Evolution of Psychotherapy” conference in Phoenix. Thousands of people were there, including many of the most influential practitioners of psychotherapy: Rogers, Bettelheim, Laing, Szasz, Wolpe, Beck, Bowen, May, Satir, and Whitaker. From the podium, in presentation after presentation, what I heard them say was: You know, the most important quality that a psychotherapist needs to have is the ability to connect with someone, and to be completely present. Emphasizing the need to be fully, completely present, these speakers went on to say something like this: And isn’t it too bad that we can’t train that? The idea that people are either born with this ability or not is simply not true.

This is exactly what we do train at Naropa. Meditation practice trains us in mindfulness, awareness, and maitri. It trains us to be fully present and to recognize the difference between connecting and not connecting with someone else. There is nothing mysterious about being fully present; it can be learned. But it takes tremendous work, and it takes the willingness to experience our own confusion thoroughly. In the West, very few of us are encouraged to sit quietly with ourselves in this way. While some traditions of prayer and of psychotherapy encourage a reflective mode, by and large it is rare in our culture and in the training of psychotherapists.

Meditation practice is a lifetime endeavor, a gradual process of awakening to our brilliant sanity. It also helps us develop the courage to be tender-hearted, and the confidence to look our experience in the face. Simply sitting there quietly, doing nothing much, develops tremendous fearlessness. You cannot be a Contemplative Psychotherapist if you are not practicing meditation; you cannot meditate while you are in training, and then stop meditating and continue to practice Contemplative Psychotherapy. Being a Contemplative Psychotherapist means having an ongoing meditation practice that informs your psychotherapeutic work.

### *Maitri Space Awareness Practice*

A hallmark of the contemplative training at Naropa is the Maitri Space Awareness practice. This discipline, conceived by Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche and Zen master Suzuki Roshi, is practiced in five rooms, all designed by Trungpa, Rinpoche. Originally intended to be used in the context of a healing community by people whose minds were too chaotic to do sitting meditation practice, it is now used primarily in training psychotherapists, as well as by meditation practitioners, teachers, and artists.<sup>4</sup> These five rooms are designed to evoke the five basic energies called "Buddha-families." Each Buddha-family embodies a particular style of relating to the phenomenal world.

Each of the five rooms is a different color and has its own arrangement of windows. A specific posture is held in each room.

Together, the rooms and postures evoke, or provoke, particular states of mind. Although somewhat different for everyone who goes into them, in general they tend to intensify experience. This gives the training therapist the opportunity to experience heightened anger, jealousy, confusion, clarity, and so on, as well as the opportunity to develop maitri. We learn to befriend ourselves by inviting the very things we usually avoid and by being with them very simply and gently. We learn that even though these states of mind are rich and full, they are also essentially transitory and empty.

The space awareness practice is usually done in the context of a residential program, and is always done in conjunction with sitting meditation. The practice introduces us to the tremendous space and clarity of our minds and teaches us to befriend that experience.

The discovery of space, for the Contemplative Psychotherapist, is the experience of the most fundamental aspects of being: emptiness, clarity, and warmth. This discovery is made through the sitting practice of meditation and the Maitri Space Awareness practice. Obviously we cannot wait until we are fully in touch with brilliant sanity before we start working with others, because that would require us to be enlightened before we could be therapists. That seems

too steep a demand, but it does seem necessary to develop some conviction that our minds and our lives are workable. It is necessary, also, to develop some degree of mindfulness and some degree of maitri. These qualities make it possible to be with a client.

## CLARIFYING INTENTION: THE VAJRA FAMILY

The second Buddha-family is “Vajra,” and it is connected with the element of water. When water is turbulent it clouds our ability to see what lies beneath it. When water is clear, it lets us see right through it to the bottom of a pond and it seems to make the rocks there stand out more sharply than they do in the air.

The Vajra-family wisdom has to do with clarity, so our topic here is clarifying our intention with respect to psychotherapy. What are we trying to do? Our overall intention is the uncovering or nurturing of brilliant sanity, which translates into helping clients develop mindfulness and maitri. We have, too, the many more immediate intentions which can arise as the situation calls for them. And we have, from the Buddhist point of view, the best overall intention, which is *bodhicitta*: the intention to become enlightened in order to benefit all beings. This selfless intention puts the needs of others before our own and can only arise from our brilliant sanity, which is related to what Buddhists call “egolessness.”

### *Ego: The Obstacle to Discovering Brilliant Sanity*

If the ultimate truth is that we are brilliantly sane—empty, clear, and compassionate—why do we not experience ourselves that way most of the time? In Buddhist psychology, this question points to the origin of confusion and suffering: we do not recognize our true nature but instead struggle to be other than who we are. This mistaken self who we struggle to be is what is meant here by ego.

The Buddha taught that the cause of our suffering and confusion is grasping—reaching out, grabbing, and trying to hang on—and in this case, grasping onto the notion of a solid, separate, and per-

manent self which is called "ego." We then attempt to cherish this so-called self, to defend it, to get it nice things, and to keep bad things away from it. This is what leads to suffering, confusion, and pain.

We should not confuse this notion of ego with Western ideas that refer to the use of logic and rational thought, the ability to contact one's experience, and a sense of confidence. Ego here is a sense of ourselves as solid, separate, and permanent.

Seeing ourselves as "solid" means that we believe there is something within us that is not made up of other elements. But where is the "self" if not in the various physical and mental experiences—sensations, emotions, perceptions, thoughts, images, and so on—which we do not regard as self? Buddhism suggests that rather than a "mind" which is some "thing," we find instead a "mindstream," a stream of ever-changing events. Emotions, thoughts, images, and particular patterns come and go.

A "separate" self means that we believe that we exist independently from others and our environment. To the Buddhist, we exist interdependently with all the elements of our experience in any one moment.

"Permanent" implies that rather than recognizing that everything in our experience is always moving and changing, we regard ourselves as having an unchanging self separate from the experiences which arise and dissolve.

For example, we might identify with an implied observer of our experience. In the Buddhist view, the act of seeing cannot ultimately be divided into someone who sees and something that is seen. Close examination reveals the nondual nature of experience. When we play golf, where is the separation between the golfer and the golfing? In the same way, we cannot find an experiencer separate from the experience.

The Buddhist teachings on the *skandhas* examine how ego arises and how it is maintained. A detailed discussion of this system is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>5</sup> Because the notion of a solid, permanent, and separate self is a fiction, it is tremendously



difficult to maintain. Buddhism teaches that all painful emotions come from this self-deception. It appropriates our basic energy and is experienced as a variety of negative, painful emotions.

Anger, pride, craving, jealousy, and stupidity are five basic negative or confused emotions based on this notion of a separate self. We get angry because something threatens this self; we crave things that will support this self; we ignore whatever is irrelevant to our sense of who we are. We struggle to maintain ego, and this ongoing struggle permeates our lives. Because our basic nature is actually open and clear, this sense of struggle is the problem. Straining to be something other than who we are prevents us from experiencing our brilliant sanity. It prevents us from experiencing ourselves as open space, clarity, and warmth. Ego, the attempt to be other than who we are, is, from the contemplative point of view, the generic, all-purpose psychopathology. Healing is the dropping of that struggle. It is that simple.

Ongoing meditation practice allows our solid notions of self, others, and the phenomenal world to soften. Meditation technique lets us see our habitual ego-clinging on the spot, and lets us relax our struggles. By learning to be with ourselves, we directly experience our sanity. The experience of sanity is bringing mindfulness and maitri to whatever arises, and we can bring this to our work with clients.

### *Ego and Therapeutic Intention*

As long as we are grounded in ego, we will try to protect and maintain that false sense of self. Although we genuinely desire to help others and long to go beyond the narrow confines of ego-clinging, we are still easily caught up in the subtle and not-so-subtle activity of ego. To the extent that we are defending a self-cherishing attitude, to that extent we are less available to our clients. With no attitude of maitri, we are less open, less clear and less compassionate.

When our intentions are confused, we may fall into what has been called “therapeutic aggression.” This is one kind of “wrong

intention.” Therapeutic aggression refers to the therapist’s intention and subsequent actions to get the client to change. It is designed, not for the benefit of the client, but for the comfort of the therapist. If, for example, I am uncomfortable with the awkward uneasiness of my client as he tries to put his feelings into words, I may offer him some descriptions of his feelings. “You mean that you would like to tell your boss that you are uncomfortable when she asks you about your co-workers, but you are afraid that she might give you a hard time if you tell her?”

My suggestion may be accurate, and the client may even be relieved to have his feelings made clear. However, my suggestion is made because I am not comfortable with the experience of openness, uncertainty and awkwardness that I feel while the client struggles to speak for himself. This is therapeutic aggression. I may abort the client’s discovery of his own resources for my comfort. Therapeutic aggression is the therapist’s attempt to support her own ego. It might be used, for example, to perpetuate my myth of myself as an effective therapist who helps clients, rather than as someone who is uncomfortable with my client’s uneasiness.

Another kind of “wrong intention” is “psychological materialism.” This is similar to what Trungpa, Rinpoche has called “spiritual materialism,” the misuse of spiritual practices to support ego.<sup>6</sup> Psychological materialism is the misuse of psychological techniques to support ego. On the other hand, we do not attack the activity of ego, as I show below. Our overall intention is to uncover brilliant sanity, and our various interventions must have that aspiration behind them.

### *Recognizing Sanity in the Midst of Pathology*

We cannot maintain ego all the time. Since ego is not real and requires so much maintenance, it falls apart constantly. Therefore it is possible to glimpse our true nature. When we suddenly do not know what we are doing, or how we feel about what is happening, we feel “groundless.” Usually, we experience such “gaps” as anx-

ity. From a contemplative point of view it is possible, in those moments when things fall apart, to recognize our sanity breaking through.

When things are falling apart, we have potent opportunities for insight into what is really happening. Just before a car crash, our minds seem to slow down and we notice things with great precision. Tremendous awareness arises of the environment and the details within it. When the danger is past, our mental chatter starts up again. But before that, there is tremendous clarity of thought.

When our expectations are not met, or when someone close to us is dying, or we are falling in love, there is a quality of freshness, simplicity, freedom from struggle. In such moments we can glimpse our brilliant sanity or the sanity of someone else. Such moments are not necessarily pleasant, but they are vivid and true.

Whenever we are not trying to maintain ego and its storylines, our true nature shines through. It cannot help itself. A traditional analogy is that our sanity is like the sun behind the clouds. The sun is shining whether we see it or not, and as the clouds of our confusion part, the sun naturally shines through. It may look very cloudy, but the sun is still shining. Contemplative Psychotherapists are trained to recognize glimpses of brilliant sanity. Because we can only recognize the signs of sanity in others when we can glimpse it in ourselves, tremendous emphasis is placed on working with one's own mind through sitting meditation, Maitri Space Awareness practice, and body-awareness disciplines which bring mind and body together in the present moment.

Maitri Space Awareness practice is particularly good training in recognizing that each of the confused emotions, when experienced directly, without grasping to self, is actually the energy of wisdom. The "Vajra" room is a deep blue. The practitioner lies on her belly with outstretched arms. In the wall facing her are a few long, narrow windows. The glass in the windows is dark blue like the walls and light shines dimly behind them. This room tends to evoke the experience of constriction; not being able to see completely pro-

vokes many to anger. Some fall asleep, others feel like they are at the bottom of the sea.

Each of the rooms is associated with a color, a season, a time of day and other natural phenomena. Vajra is winter and the east. The wisdom aspect of Vajra is called "mirror-like wisdom," which is essential clarity. Imagine, if you will, a cold, bright day in mid-winter. The sun shines on the trees which are coated with ice. It is dazzling and clear. This is the clarity of which we are capable. The difference between the confused emotion of anger and the wisdom aspect of clarity is grasping itself. In anger we have a moment of seeing clearly. We then reject what we have seen because we do not like it or it threatens our sense of how things should be. The original perception may be clear, but we narrow it by referencing it to ego. Clear perception is filtered through ego: does this perception support or threaten ego? Grasping onto the self that we impute to have done the seeing, we solidify our position of "this" versus "that."

The maitri-room practice lets us see again and again how this process works. We become increasingly able to tolerate the openness and uncertainty of not grasping. We experience the difference between the constricted, angry, confused state of grasping mind and the state of mind which is fluid, open, and willing to be uncertain.

Both sitting meditation and Maitri Space Awareness practice help us to recognize wisdom, sanity, within all states of body and mind, our own and others'.

Our intention to uncover and nurture brilliant sanity in our clients requires us to clarify that intention moment to moment. The Contemplative Psychotherapist is trained to recognize both ego-clinging and basic sanity in her own and others' experience. Through meditation and Space Awareness practice, we clarify our intention to work with basic sanity. In our work, we highlight this intention, because it is often so easy to lose track of what we are trying to do. Particularly in busy agency settings, we can get caught up in just getting through the day. It is helpful, therefore, partic-

ularly when we feel confused or are about to begin a session, to “flash” for a moment on our intention.

## PROVIDING HOSPITALITY: THE RATNA FAMILY

The first two topics—acknowledging space, or brilliant sanity itself, and clarifying our intention in both the overall and immediate senses—can be said to occur within the mind of the therapist. The third topic, while continuing to focus on the therapist and how she works with her mind, begins to move toward action.

Our third topic, “providing hospitality,” is connected to the “Ratna” Buddha-family. The Ratna family is related to the earth element. The earth is stable and welcoming; it does not reject us. The wisdom of Ratna is called the “wisdom of equanimity.” Equanimity means recognizing that all beings possess brilliant sanity and basic goodness in equal measure. On the Buddhist path, when one takes the *bodhisattva* vow as a commitment to develop *bodhi-citta* and to practice in order to benefit beings, one invites all beings to be one’s guests. To whatever degree we feel this inspiration, we can regard all beings, and especially our clients, as guests.

### *Cleaning House and Gathering Offerings*

The first thing we usually do when we invite guests over is clean the house and make a welcoming environment. The Shambhala teachings, especially, stress the importance of an uplifted environment in order to manifest our natural dignity and wakefulness. When our home is a mess, filled with clutter and dirt, this is more difficult both physically and mentally.

In Contemplative Psychotherapy, cleaning house means cleaning up our side of the relationship. In many psychological approaches, we talk about working with our own issues and being able to recognize countertransference. In the contemplative approach, it means continuing our meditation practice, so that we recognize what is going on in our own minds as we are working.

In addition, therapists can benefit from supervision and perhaps their own therapy. We have also developed our own style of case presentation, to which I refer below. Overall, cleaning the house means removing the obstacles to being open to whatever the client brings to us.

Openness requires us to recognize and acknowledge our own “hot spots.” Genuine hospitality is extended to ourselves as *maitri*. On the one hand, we may aspire to be welcoming and open to all clients. On the other hand, we have to be kind to ourselves by not taking on clients that present to us personal obstacles to recognizing their basic goodness. Being kind to ourselves is a way to be kind to our clients. For example, it would be unkind—both to ourselves and to our clients—for many of us as therapists to agree to work with perpetrators of domestic or sexual abuse. It would be just as inappropriate to work with someone for whose issues one is inadequately trained. If we cannot “be there” for clients, then we cannot work with them.

A second way to provide hospitality can be called “gathering offerings.” The making of offerings, both real and imaginary, is a traditional Buddhist practice to develop generosity. In order to practice generosity, we have to recognize that we have gifts, resources, to offer. So, gathering offerings has to do with recognizing our own richness, recognizing what we have to offer. It has to do with rousing our own courage and confidence, as well as staying informed and well-trained in our field.

### *Creating an Environment of Maitri*

The way the psychotherapist works with her own mind during a therapy session has a profound impact on the atmosphere of the relationship. When the psychotherapist brings mindfulness and *maitri* to whatever arises for her, the environment itself can become *maitri*. The therapist tracks thoughts and emotions as they arise, notices when she becomes distracted or sleepy, then gently brings mindfulness to her experience. She doesn't manipulate it further

nor does she get caught up in criticizing herself for becoming distracted. Ideally, as clients talk about painful or not-so-painful things, they are greeted by an environment and a state of mind that welcomes their experience and pushes nothing away. Realistically, that is not exactly how it happens, but that is our aspiration.

If we come into a session radiating confusion, we can be sure our client will pick it up. In the same way, he or she may experience *maitri* simply by being around us because we are working with our experience mindfully and practicing *maitri* on the spot. That may be the client's first experience of such openness and warmth. It is very powerful, and it goes a very long way. The absence of struggle is the beginning of healing. This process comes about because of "exchange," which is discussed in the next section.

#### OPENING TO EXCHANGE: THE PADMA FAMILY

The fourth Buddha-family, "Padma," is associated with the element of fire, with the "wisdom of discriminating awareness," and with compassion. When fire burns wildly it consumes whatever is in its path. Unlike wildfire, "sane" fire warms us and provides light.

The Padma family recognizes our connection to others. While ego's logic mistakenly clings to a notion of self separate from others, the wisdom of Padma points to the interconnectedness of all beings. It also highlights our aloneness. Even though we do not exist separately from our environment and the others in it, no one else has our unique experience, so we are both connected and alone. Exchanging self for others is a powerful way to work with this experience.

"Exchange," or "exchanging self for other," is a central theme in Contemplative Psychotherapy, and refers to our natural ability to directly experience the client.<sup>7</sup> From the Buddhist point of view, exchange occurs because we are not solid, separate, and permanent selves; we are connected with others. Therefore, we can pick up on, or tune in to, what is happening with somebody else. We resonate

with what is happening almost as if by magic. This is not a Buddhist technique, but rather a phenomenon that happens all the time.

For example, if I'm sitting in a room with an anxious client, I may start experiencing restlessness. I might notice my foot starting to tap, my palms becoming sweaty, or my mouth getting dry. My mind may start to speed up and my thoughts become somewhat scattered. I might start experiencing things that I would identify in myself as the experience of anxiety. I do not think that there is anyone who works in this field who has not had this experience, but we do not always recognize it for what it is.

I think it is an error to say that we are experiencing the client's anxiety. At that moment, we are experiencing our own experience. We are experiencing our own anxiety, but the reason we are experiencing it may be because of exchange. This is why it is so important to have our own meditation practice: to clean our house, and to go on cleaning it, so that we know whether or not we arrived at the session already feeling anxious. We need to know how anxiety is being triggered: is it countertransference, or are we exchanging with the client? Exchange is a very rich source of information about what is going on with the client. It is not the only one, of course, but it is a very rich and potent one.

The way to work with exchange from our point of view mirrors what we have been learning in our meditation practice. We are as present as we are able to be; touch our experience fully but momentarily—just a touch, but a complete touch. It can be like tasting an anchovy. One taste is enough to know what it tastes like, we do not have to eat nine hundred of them. One touch, and then let go, let it dissolve. Then touch again. It will have changed, or may not, just touch and go. There is a rhythm like breathing to touching and letting go. So we work with the exchange simply by working with our own mind as we have trained to do in our sitting meditation practice.<sup>8</sup>

Exchange manifests our fundamental connection with our clients. Our willingness to experience that connection requires us



to give up the illusion of maintaining a safe and objective distance from them. We are willing to be fully present, to experience exchange and connect to a client's pain. We may have a direct and bittersweet experience of the client's predicament. Then our natural compassion, our longing to remove that pain, may arise sharply. Unless we have practiced being with the sharp edges of our own pain, we are likely to become distracted. We will find ourselves chattering away about something else or changing the subject. By working with a heart that is open to exchange, genuine relationship is cultivated as the context within which psychotherapy takes place.

In Contemplative Psychotherapy we have developed a special practice of case presentation called "Body, Speech, and Mind." This is a descriptive practice, the whole point of which is to evoke the presence of the client and the therapist's relationship with the client. The case presentation consists of a description of the body, the speech, and the mind of the client. Then the therapist and everybody in the room tends to exchange with that client and works with any obstacles to the exchange.<sup>9</sup>

Working with exchange in sessions and in case presentation leads us to a heartfelt understanding of the client. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a poem and commentary called "Please Call Me by My True Names," which illustrates how exchanging with others, putting ourselves in their places, can lead to deep understanding.<sup>10</sup> In this poem, he describes his anger and sadness at hearing about the death of a young boat woman who died throwing herself overboard after being raped by sea pirates. He traces in his imagination what it would have been like to have grown up as the sea pirate: how he could have been born in a poor fishing village, grown up without being properly educated, without knowing anything, stayed ignorant, received little care. Then he imagines how he might have gone out in the boats with the other men as he grew older. He is a young man and everybody around him is jumping on the boat, and they are killing and stealing and raping. The poet tells us how, if that had been his life, he could have been that same sea pirate. That kind of heartfelt connection and understanding leads to compassion.

When we are open to exchange, we actively enter the client's world and see things as the client does. To do this takes courage and the willingness to let go of all our usual reference points—the states of mind with which we are most familiar. We could say that it requires us to leave home, to drop ego.

The basis for exchange, for fully entering the client's world, is a conviction in brilliant sanity. If we are afraid that we will “get stuck” in a psychotic client's nightmare world, we will certainly hold back. But, if we have an experience-based belief that states of mind are essentially empty, we can experience our fear and go ahead and enter the client's world.

If we are not aware of this phenomenon of exchange we can perpetuate all kinds of confusion. We may not like to work with certain clients because of the exchange that occurs. We may not like the state of mind that we get into when we are with that person. We might identify them as “bad” clients. But if we have been practicing meditation and cultivating maitri, we will find it much easier to be with whatever state of mind arises when we are with somebody else. This is why maitri is such a pivotal practice in Contemplative Psychotherapy.

## COMPASSIONATE ACTION: THE KARMA FAMILY

The last Buddha-family is the “Karma” family. Karma is associated with the element of the wind. Wind blows always in one direction at a time. When our minds are blowing like a strong wind, we get caught up in speedy and inappropriate activity. The wisdom of Karma, “all-accomplishing action,” refers to action which is appropriate and effective.

Contemplative Psychotherapists are interested in cultivating sanity wherever they find it. They become expert at recognizing it in some of the strangest disguises. In the wildest psychotic dream to save the world is the seed of compassion. In the extreme paranoia of a delusional client is often the evidence of tremendous clarity and precision. Interest in a client's sanity, rather than fascination with

their pathology, allows us to help them reconnect to their sanity. By helping them discover who they are, rather than adding to the struggle to be who they are not, we help healing to occur. At a practical level, it means helping the client develop mindfulness and maitri. There are several ways that the Contemplative Psychotherapist can do this.

Having invited the client as our guest and opened to the exchange, we may profoundly understand the client's dilemma. This kind of understanding leads the therapist to compassionate action. So the final topic has to do with the activity of the contemplative psychotherapist.

In one sense there are few Contemplative Psychotherapy techniques.<sup>11</sup> We are encouraged to be present in the moment and to make use of our richness, our creativity and our resources. As in many psychotherapeutic traditions, we each find our own style. The Maitri practice develops an appreciation for individual differences in working. While we may draw upon many different psychotherapeutic techniques, some general principles have developed in working with clients to uncover brilliant sanity and to cultivate mindfulness and maitri. And while the following discussion tends to reflect my own work with individual clients, other Contemplative Psychotherapists have applied these principles in a variety of settings and with a variety of clients.<sup>12</sup>

I have found two main approaches to be useful in helping clients develop mindfulness. The first is to work with activities or "practices" that cultivate mindfulness. The second is to transform "mindless practices" in which the client already engages.

We bring the spirit of mindfulness/awareness practice into our work, rather than teaching clients to meditate. In my experience, it is more beneficial to refer clients to a meditation teacher or program rather than becoming their meditation instructor myself. If I am both therapist and meditation instructor the client's relationship to practice can become quite confused. A client might meditate to please me, or might stop because we have hit a difficult time in therapy. I would not want to abort a client's meditation practices,

so I do my best to support whatever choices they may make about this very personal decision.

Most often I work with potential or ongoing disciplines that clients already practice. When we search, we find that everybody has potential mindfulness practices. For example, I worked one winter with a client who was a rock climber. This particular client was working with grief and depression. He often had thoughts that would interfere with what was happening at work or at home. I asked him what he did when distracting thoughts arose when he was climbing. (We also talked about whether it was smart for him to continue climbing. And he convinced me that it was, in fact, a good idea.) “Well,” he said, “when I’m climbing, if something comes into my mind, I can just let it go.”

I asked, “Do you know how you do that?”

“No,” he said, “but I know how to do it. I don’t know what I do, but I know how to do it.”

He had a way of noticing the contrast between being present or not, then letting the thoughts go and coming back to the present moment. It was a bit like labeling “thinking” when we notice we are distracted in our meditation practice. So we worked together to apply to other areas of his life what he already knew from rock climbing. Another client I worked with a few years ago had been living in a psychotic dream-world for fifteen years. Our practice together was nail polishing. She was very interested in nail polish and liked to have me put it on her nails. I would ask her which color she wanted to use. She spent most of her time not being present at all, but when we polished her nails, she would bring her body and mind together and come into the present moment to decide if she liked pink or red nail polish. And how did it smell? Did they smell the same? I would ask a lot of questions, inviting her into the present moment, and to pay attention to her sense perceptions. This is the essence of mindfulness practice.

We can find innumerable opportunities to encourage mindfulness with our clients. Anything that involves the body—most sports, arts, music, putting on make-up, picking out clothes in the morn-

ing—all of these things can be used to cultivate mindfulness. Shopping is a very good one. What are the details of texture, color, price and so on which result in choosing one item over another?

In addition to working with mindfulness practice, I also work with “mindless” practices, which we all have in abundance. My personal favorite is paper-clip twiddling, as my students point out to me all the time. I took a class recently with a teacher who had a chalk practice. He would stand in front of the room and twiddle his chalk. He was not aware of it, I am sure, because he would end up putting it into his hair and all over his clothes. The purpose of these practices is to disconnect our attention from what is happening. We may read novels, watch TV, drink, do drugs. Anything that splits our attention is potentially a mindless practice, such as hair-fiddling, taking our glasses on and off, playing with our pen, or playing with our fingers. Some practices occur completely within the mind: obsessing practices, fantasizing practices. If we look, we see many of them. They are the things we do that start us in the direction of dissociation. The body is in the office seemingly paying attention to the client; the mind is off at the grocery store wondering whether to have broccoli or spinach for dinner.

When a client’s experience becomes too intense or frightening, he or she will tend to move into mindless practices. By being aware of these practices, a client is empowered to use them more mindfully and, at the same time, to pace themselves. Sometimes a client’s harmful practice, like alcohol addiction, can be replaced with a less harmful one like reading science fiction novels. The skillful use of these practices can support a client’s growing sense of confidence and maitri without encouraging them to become self-aggressive or materialistic.

I work with a client’s mindless practices by first becoming curious about them. This, in turn, may lead to mindfulness. Nail-biting, for example, is a great mindless practice for developing mindfulness. Which fingernail do you pick? How do you know which one to pick? How long do you continue? How do you know when to stop? What internal cue tells you when to start? I sometimes

tell my clients that I collect mindless practices, and they come up with wonderful ones. The more attentiveness we bring to something, the more mindfulness we cultivate.

The therapist's interest highlights mindless practices for the client. The practices then become reminders to come back to the present moment, rather than exit ramps into discursive thought or "spacing out." Therapists, also, can make use of their own mindless practices to come back to the present. When we become aware of mindlessness, we become aware of what the moment of contrast feels like. We then have many ways to be present with a client or with ourselves.

Mindfulness practices, on the other hand, help clients develop attentive precision which can be applied in many areas of their experience. Generally I encourage clients to bring mindfulness first to their environments and the way in which they are living. Then, as this area of their life becomes more stable, I encourage them to bring mindfulness to body, feelings and sensations. Beyond this, we move into recognizing how their patterns work. Mindfulness helps clients see how their thoughts and actions lead to particular emotions and other consequences; it also helps them explore what happens when they choose to refrain from or experiment with some mental or behavioral pattern. Mindfulness helps them tolerate the intensity and uncertainty which generally arise when mindless practices are altered or given up.

Bringing mindfulness to a mindless shopping practice, one client was able to track the anxiety associated with her shopping. She discovered that anxiety preceded the shopping; that she felt spaced out when she was in the stores; and that her anxiety returned again once she was home and realized how she had overspent. As we continued to work, she became mindful of how anxiety arose and subsided if she refrained from the shopping altogether. She learned to be with her uneasiness and began to track what was happening in her life to evoke it.

True mindfulness is tempered with *maitri*. As clients become

more aware of what they are doing, it is increasingly important to support them in the development of maitri. This often begins when the client experiences the atmosphere of maitri provided by the therapist. As psychotherapists, we are familiar with maitri and its obstacles within ourselves, so we can help clients recognize moments of maitri when they naturally arise. We can also point out the contrast between such moments and moments of self-aggression, which is the opposite of maitri.

A particularly vulnerable time occurs when clients begin to see how they are responsible for their own pain. At such times a client may experience feelings of disgust or revulsion for how he or she has been behaving or thinking. This revulsion can be recognized as a moment of sanity, a moment of clear seeing. With the help of the therapist, clients can use these insights as opportunities to continue waking up, rather than turning them into evidence of their unworkability. The difference between these two alternatives is maitri—being able to see clearly and let things be what they are without accepting or condemning them. When a client is helped to become curious about such moments, it can shift his or her allegiance toward sanity.

A traditional Buddhist metaphor for this shift is stepping onto a path. Waking up, uncovering brilliant sanity, is a gradual process. If we exert no effort at all, nothing happens and we continue to wander in confusion. On the other hand, if we are too ambitious, then we become ensnared in the psychological materialism which characterizes ego-clinging. So, we are always trying to stay “on the path.” The identification of mindless practices is a rich resource to draw on for both therapist and client in staying within a zone of workability. The signposts along the path continue to be the presence of mindfulness and maitri. When we try too hard, or not at all, we lose both. Ideally, clients learn to continue on their own. The commitment and the ability to stay on the path of mindfulness and maitri is often a sign that it is time to terminate therapy.

## CONCLUSION

Contemplative Psychotherapy draws on the Buddhist teachings on the limitlessness of sanity beyond the bounds of ego, and on the Shambhala teachings on bravery and gentleness in creating an uplifted environment and an enlightened society. From both traditions, Contemplative Psychotherapy takes the personal discipline of sitting meditation as the foundation of the therapist's ongoing development. In this way, these contemplative traditions inform the discipline of psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy, contemplative or otherwise, rarely occurs as neatly as described above. Our training helps us let go of any ideal notions of how our work should proceed. An ongoing practice of sitting meditation helps us foster mindfulness and maitri, so that we are better able to be present with our clients; to recognize their sanity as well as their pathology; to open to exchange and also to let go; and better able to acknowledge our own obstacles and the blind spots which mask our essential interconnectedness. The principles and practices of mindfulness/awareness and maitri help Contemplative Psychotherapists cultivate their own brilliant sanity as well as that of their clients.

## NOTES

1. Gerald May, for example, has written a wonderful book, *Will and Spirit*, about what he calls "a contemplative psychology" based in the Christian tradition. In this article I confine my discussion to the practice of Contemplative Psychotherapy based in Buddhist and Shambhalian teachings, as it has been developed at The Naropa Institute.
2. See Trungpa (1984).
3. For readers interested in learning to meditate, Shambhala Training offers weekend programs in many cities in the United States, Canada, and Europe.
4. Maitri Space Awareness practice may be experienced by participating in programs held at Karmê-Chöling in Barnet, Vermont; in Marburg, Germany; and through The Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. Programs vary in length from weekends to ten weeks, and are often geared to particular interest groups. For example, the Contemplative Psychotherapy department at Naropa offers a week-long program each June for mental health professionals.



5. For a thorough discussion of the system of the *skandhas*, see Guenther, H. and Kawamura, L. (1975) or Trungpa (1978).
6. See Trungpa (1987), "Introduction."
7. Traditional texts use the expression "exchanging self for other" to refer to particular contemplations one may do to arouse *bodhicitta*. See, for example, Shantideva (1992). The term has come to be used in Contemplative Psychotherapy to refer to an immediate and direct experience of another.
8. See Wegela (1988).
9. See Rabin and Walker (1987).
10. "Please Call Me By My True Names," by Thich Nhat Hanh. In Eppsteiner, F. (1988), pp. 31-33.
11. A technique which is unique to Contemplative Psychotherapy is "basic attendance." This specialized approach to environmental treatment is discussed at length in Jeffrey M. Fortuna's article in the current issue of this journal.
12. For examples of the application of Contemplative Psychotherapy's principles in other settings and with other populations, see Podvoll (1990), Luyten (1985), and Fitch (1985).

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